

FROM THE BOOKSHELF #145
GENE KERN

JUNE 15, 1976

A WIND IN AFRICA, BY PASCAL JAMES IMPERATO

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES... FROM THE BOOKSHELF ... IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY, A WIND IN AFRICA, BY PASCAL JAMES IMPERATO, PUBLISHED BY WARREN H. GREEN. HERE IS BOOK EDITOR -----WITH GENE KERN'S REPORT.

EDITOR: ONE DAY IN NINETEEN SIXTY-SIX, AN EIGHTY-YEAR-OLD BOY NAMED MAMADOU DABALA LEFT HIS VILLAGE IN THE DUNES OF MALI TO SAIL DOWNRIVER WITH HIS MOTHER TO VISIT RELATIVES IN THE NIGER CROSSROADS TRADING CENTER OF TILLABERI. HE FOUND UNLIMITED ENJOYMENT IN ITS CONGLOMERATION OF GOODS AND PEOPLE...BLACK-SKINNED AFRICANS AND FAIR-COMPLEXIONED DESERT NOMADS BUYING AND SELLING TO PEUL HERDSMEN AND TUAREG CAMEL CARAVAN MASTERS...TRADERS AND MERCHANDISE FROM AS FAR AWAY AS GHANA, DAHOMEY AND THE IVORY COAST.

BUT MAMADOU FOUND SOMETHING ELSE IN TILLABERI'S WONDROUS MARKET, AND IT MADE HIM SICK. AT FIRST, JUST A FEVER AND HEADACHE, WHICH HIS MOTHER TREATED WITH HERBS AND CHARMS BOUGHT FROM HAUSA MEDICINE MEN FROM NIGERIA. WHEN THAT FAILED TO CURE HIM, SHE SENT WORD TO HER HUSBAND, AND THEN CALLED A MARABOUT, A KORANIC TEACHER WELL-VERSED IN ALL KINDS OF ILLNESS AND ENDOWED WITH KNOWLEDGE OF THE DESTINY OF LIFE. HE TOLD THE ANXIOUS PARENTS THEIR SON HAD BEEN "CURSED BY AN EVIL GENIE WHO HAD SENT THIS

EDITOR: ILLNESS OUT WITH THE WIND. THE FEVER WILL PASS,"
(CONT) HE SAID, AND HE WAS BELIEVED.

BUT MAMADOU WORSENER, HIS SKIN ERUPTING IN HUNDREDS OF LARGE UGLY BLISTERS THAT DISTORTED HIS FEATURES AND COVERED THE INSIDE OF HIS MOUTH AND THROAT SO HE COULD BARELY BREATHE AND COULD NOT SPEAK. HIS PARENTS HAD NEVER SEEN AN ILLNESS LIKE THIS AND COULD ONLY THINK TO TAKE HIM UP THE NIGER, HOME TO MALI FOR TREATMENT BY THEIR OWN MARABOUTS. BUT THEY TOO HAD SEEN NOTHING LIKE IT. NOR HAD THE SCORES OF VILLAGERS WHO CAME TO LOOK AND SYMPATHIZE.

THOUGH NO ONE KNEW IT AT THE TIME, WHEN MAMADOU DABALA DIED THREE DAYS LATER, THE SMALLPOX VIRUS HAD BEEN SEEDING IN TWO VILLAGES ALONG THE RIVER AND WOULD SOON BE CARRIED TO OTHER CENTERS, SCARRING, BLINDING AND KILLING THOUSANDS BEFORE IT WAS RECOGNIZED AND THE AUTHORITIES WERE NOTIFIED AND ASKED FOR HELP TO COUNTER AN EPIDEMIC OF THIS ANCIENT PLAGUE.

THAT WAS THE SITUATION DOCTOR "PAT" IMPERATO, DEPUTY HEALTH COMMISSIONER FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK, FOUND WHEN HE WAS SENT TO MALI BY THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO DIRECT A MEDICAL MISSION THE OBJECTIVE OF WHICH WAS NOTHING LESS THAN TO VACCINATE THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF THE COUNTRY AGAINST SMALLPOX AND YELLOW FEVER, AND ALL CHILDREN BETWEEN SIX MONTHS AND SIX YEARS OF AGE AGAINST MEASLES. THE STORY OF THAT MISSION -

EDITOR:
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ITS TRIALS, FRUSTRATIONS, CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES - HAS BEEN DOCUMENTED BY DOCTOR IMPERATO IN A BOOK HE CALLS A WIND IN AFRICA. BUT THE READER WHO EXPECTS A DRY, FACTUAL ACCOUNT OF A MODERN MEDICAL MIRACLE IS IN FOR A SURPRISE. NOT THAT THE FACTS ALONE ARE UNIMPRESSIVE: OVER A PERIOD OF FIVE YEARS, THE DOCTOR AND HIS LOCALLY-TRAINED MALIAN ASSISTANTS ADMINISTERED OVER FOUR MILLION SMALLPOX AND ONE MILLION MEASLES VACCINATIONS IN SOME EIGHT THOUSAND VILLAGES AND NOMAD CAMPS, AS WELL AS TREAT MILLIONS FOR OTHER DISEASES. BUT THAT IS ONLY A SMALL PART OF A WIND IN AFRICA. FOR IN THE COURSE OF HIS MODEST, PRECISE YET FREQUENTLY LYRIC NARRATIVE, THE AUTHOR PAINTS A LARGER CANVAS ENCOMPASSING THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF A LAND AND ITS PEOPLE...THE ORIGIN, HISTORY, LEGENDS, NATURE OF A RESILIENT PEOPLE AND A HOSTILE ECOLOGY.

THOUGH THE STORY EVENTUALLY COVERS ALL OF MALI'S ONE AND A QUARTER MILLION SQUARE KILOMETERS, IT BEGINS IN THE SOUTHEAST SECTOR. THE AUTHOR EVOKES THE SCENE:

VOICE: "HERE THE NIGER HURRIES ITS USUAL SLOW PACE BEFORE TUMBLING OVER THE NARROW CATARACTS AT LABEZANGA...IT IS A WORLD OF SILENCE AND STILLNESS WHERE NOT EVEN THE RIVER MAKES ANY NOISE AS IT CUTS ITS WAY THROUGH SOFT SAND DUNES AND DISAPPEARS INTO A MIDDAY HORIZON OF QUIVERING HEAT WAVES AND DANCING MIRAGES. THE SAHARA IS NEXT DOOR; HARSH, PATIENT, AND UNFEELING.."

EDITOR: THE DIFFICULT TERRAIN, OPPRESSIVE CLIMATE, NOMADIC EXISTENCE OF MUCH OF THE POPULATION, AND BUREAUCRATIC OBSTRUCTIONISM OF MARXIST-ORIENTED OFFICIALS (WHICH DISSOLVED OVERNIGHT WITH THE PEACEFUL CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT IN NINETEEN SIXTY-EIGHT) WERE OBSTACLES THE MISSION COULD AND DID SURMOUNT. ANOTHER WAS THE NATURAL SUSPICION OF PEOPLE IN REMOTE VILLAGES OR CAMPS WHEN SUDDENLY FACED WITH TEAMS OF VACCINATORS ARMED WITH JET INJECTORS, CAPABLE OF INOCULATING A THOUSAND PEOPLE AN HOUR, BUT UNFORTUNATELY LOOKING MORE LIKE LETHAL WEAPONS THAN IMPLEMENTS OF DELIVERANCE. A GREATER PROBLEM -- WHICH IMPERATO ADMITS THEY WERE NEVER FULLY SUCCESSFUL IN OVERCOMING -- WAS WHAT HE CALLS THE "INERTIA OF FATALISM," DERIVING IN PART FROM A BLIND FAITH IN PREDESTINATION. PEOPLE BELIEVED THAT SMALLPOX AND OTHER "WIND DISEASES" COULD NEVER BE ERADICATED BECAUSE THEY EXISTED THROUGH "GOD'S WILL," AND IT WAS THEREFORE "NOT ONLY POINTLESS, BUT EVEN SINFUL TO CHALLENGE DESTINY BY INTRODUCING A FEEBLE MAN-MADE FORCE INTO WHAT IS GOD'S EXCLUSIVE DESIGN."

VOICE: WITH SUCH AN ATTITUDE, IMPERATO HAD A DIFFICULT PROBLEM PERSUADING THE PEOPLE TO SUBMIT TO TREATMENT. HE WRITES:
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 ALTHOUGH MANY WERE MOSLEM NO MORE OF THE OLD ANINIST CULT HAD BEEN ABANDONED THAN WAS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, AND WHAT WAS COMPATIBLE WITH THE NEW FROM THE OLD REMAINED. FOR THE MISSION TO SUCCEED, IT HAD TO PRESENT WHAT IT OFFERED PEOPLE ON THEIR OWN TERMS: VACCINES

VOICE:
(CONT)

THEN WERE SEEN NOT AS ANTIGENS STIMULATING PRODUCTION OF ANTIBODIES WHICH PROTECTED AGAINST VIRUS-CAUSING DISEASES, BUT AS TALISMANS AND AMULETS WHICH INFUSED HEALTH AND PROTECTED AGAINST THE SPIRITUAL CAUSES OF DISEASE."

THERE IS NO TRACE OF SMUGNESS OR SUPERIORITY IN DOCTOR IMPERATO'S APPROACH. HE WAS HAPPY TO LEARN AS WELL AS TEACH, TO RECEIVE AS WELL AS GIVE. AS HE SAYS: "IT WAS A GREAT AND ADVENTUROUS CHALLENGE TO COME TO KNOW ALL THESE DIVERSE PEOPLES, TO UNRAVEL THEIR VIEW OF LIFE AND TO SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THEIR EYES. IN DOING SO, YOU GAINED A NEW PERSPECTIVE OF THINGS...AND CAME TO SEE THAT WHAT IS SO CLEARLY OBVIOUS TO THEM IS NOT SO TO YOU, AND VICE VERSA."

EDITOR: A WIND IN AFRICA IS A BEAUTIFUL BOOK THAT REFLECTS ITS AUTHOR'S SENSITIVITY, PERCEPTIVENESS, AND GENUINE DEVOTION TO THE FAMILY OF MAN.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REPORT ON A WIND IN AFRICA BY PASCAL JAMES IMPERATO. LISTEN NEXT WEEK (AT THIS TIME) TO ANOTHER REPORT ON ANOTHER BOOK AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING...FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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